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A BIOGRAPHY
OF
MRS. TIMOTHY EATON

written at the time of her death, March 1933,
by the late Jessie Alexander Roberts.

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MRS. TIMOTHY EATON

In the passing of Mrs. Timothy Eaton, Toronto mourns the loss not only of a lady of rare personality, charm and distinction but of one whose life will leave an indelible impress upon the industrial, philanthropic and religious life of Canada.

^{Timothy} Eighty --- years ago, in the very heart of the City of Toronto, was born a girl whose early training was entirely in and for the home, who in later years took no active part in public affairs, in women's clubs or societies and yet from whose heart and hearth emanated a spirit of kindness, helpfulness, culture and influence that not only entered into the foundations of a colossal business but set standards followed by the whole industrial world of Canada. "Behold how great a fire a little spark kindleth".

Margaret Wilson Eaton, daughter of Joseph Beattie and Elizabeth Tilt, was born on March 8, 1841 near the corner of Church and Adelaide Streets in Toronto. A few years later, her father, a general merchant, moved to Woodstock and there Margaret Beattie spent her childhood and received her education. During girlhood, she showed many evidences of the capability, energy and originality that later found expression in so many unforeseen and far-reaching enterprises.

Whatever Margaret Beattie did she did well; she pursued her musical studies with earnestness and diligence. She rode superbly, her housewifely ability received recognition in prizes won at the local Fair for breadmaking and fancy work.

In 1861, while on a visit to a friend in St. Mary's, she met the young Irishman Timothy Eaton, general merchant, and the romantic attachment culminated in marriage the following year. There in St. Mary's he r three eldest children, Edward Young, Josephine and Maggie were born and Mrs. Eaton devoted her time and talents to home making. All through her long life, she retained the Victorian ideal of home as woman's sphere and the welfare of the family as her chief consideration. Despite these self-imposed limitations, Margaret Eaton was destined to play on life's stage a much larger part than she had ever dreamed of.

In young matronhood, her aesthetic taste manifested itself in the designing of her own bonnets which were the envy of the community. So much so, that a discerning feminine customer said to Mr. Eaton, "If you could persuade Mrs. Eaton to trim some bonnets you'd see how they would sell".

The suggestion appealed to Mrs. Eaton's sense of adventure and in a small room back of the store, with her children round her, the clever amateur had great fun trimming bonnets that sold "like hot cakes".

When in 1869 the enterprising young merchant sought larger fields of effort and was considering London as a possible location, his capable helpmeet said, "Why not Toronto? The larger the place, the better the prospect" ----- and Toronto it was.

Busy years followed; five children were born in Toronto, two sons who died in infancy, George who was drowned in boyhood, William Fraser and John Craig Eaton. Devotion to home duties, included a drive to the store at the corner of Queen and Yonge Streets for her husband at the end of the day, and incidentally, a critical survey of the store and its contents. She knew all the employees personally, welcomed many of them informally to her home, entertained the whole staff annually, sent them jellies and broths when they were ill, gave them presents when they married, and showed a genuine interest in their prospects. In fact, the first Welfare Department of the T. Eaton Store was run by one woman.

When some of the saleswomen failed to impress upon Mr. Eaton the necessity of hand-mirrors for a back view of hats and cloaks, they appealed to Mrs. Eaton, whose deciding voice settled so many questions, and the mirrors were at once provided. When the growing business demanded more spacious quarters and Timothy Eaton was considering the purchase of land on the east side of Yonge Street, where larger and cheaper lots were obtainable, his wife's dictum, "The west is the busy side, Go west young man!", won the day.

In 1891 when the Firm became an Incorporated Company, Mrs. Eaton was made one of the Directors and fulfilled her duties on the Board for some years, when she requested that she be relieved of that responsibility, and that Mr. Harry McGee, a trusted friend and one of the managers of the store, should be

appointed Director in her place, a position he still occupies as Vice-President of the Company.

Mrs. Eaton had but one standard, and that was ---- "The Best". Her own three homes, in Toronto, Oakville and Muskoka bore testimony to her personal taste, which dictated the selection of everything from the paintings of the Old Masters to the smallest detail of decoration. When new counters were needed for the original Toronto store, she scorned the selection of anything less than walnut, and when the expanding business moved to its present site, she had so kindly a feeling towards the counters over which so much good business had developed, that she had part of the walnut made into a chair for her husband. That Celtic touch of sentiment and the cherishing of old associations were among Margaret Eaton's most endearing traits.

One day, many years after her husband's death, she was inspecting the re-arrangement of the china cabinet's in her Muskoka home, Ravenscrag. Her alert eye swept the shelves of Coalport, Crown Derby and old Chelsea and --- missed something. "Where's father's cup?", she asked abruptly. From the background she withdrew a large old mustache cup and without apology for its homeliness, restored it to its place of honor with the words:

"And yet for old sake's sake, dears,

'Tis the prettiest cup in the world".

This habit of expressing her thoughts and sentiments in the language of the poets came naturally to Mrs. Eaton, for her mind was a store house of poetry, old proverbs and quaint sayings

which she quoted aptly and effectively.

The words "I can't!" were an abomination to her and she discouraged their use with the prompt and decided admonition: "There's no "Can't" in the "Try" Company".

Her own thoroughness made her impatient with mediocrity, incompetence, indolence or impunctuality. She loved Jean Ingelow's lines:

"Many of us think shame of honest trade and take
No pride in our own shops. Who care
Only to quit a calling, will not make
That calling what it might be; who despise
Their work, Fate laughs at and doth let the work
Dull and degrade them...we pray you set your pride
In its proper place and never be ashamed
Of any honest calling".

and Mrs. Eaton put into practice the democratic spirit of the verse.

One summer day, the beautiful Eaton launch "The Wanda" was waiting at Barnsdale for guests expected on the incoming train, when from one of the Muskoka steamships, emerged a fireman. It was a hot day and streams of grimy perspiration run down his face. With that quick sympathy for workers that was so characteristic of her, Mrs. Eaton said impulsively to a grandson, "Take this box of candy to that fireman with Mrs. Eaton's compliments".

The man acknowledged the lady's attention with an embarrassed nod and then encouraged by her magnetic smile walked over to

the side of the Wanda and said, "I hesitated to come over to thank you Mrs. Eaton, because I'm so grimy. Mine is such a dirty work." Quick as a flash the understanding reply, "Dirty work earns clean money." "That's the true word Mrs. Eaton", he responded appreciatively and went back to his work with something more to the good than a box of candy.

Nor was this an unusual incident, for Mrs. Eaton had a daily habit of spontaneously sharing with others everything in her possession. In the garden with friends, she dispensed bouquets to the ladies and boutoniers to the men, sometimes with a favorite quotation:-

"To you it is a rose,
To me it is my heart."

--and the grace and charm of manner accompanying the act of giving greatly enhanced the pleasure of the recipient. At parties or teas, a package of goodies was always sent to the kiddies whom she loved to remember.

An Irish relative vividly recalls the gift of a wonderful doll in the days when dolls in general were nondescript affairs, and records that the elegant and life-like "Daisy" became a symbol in the household of the generosity and taste of the donor.

Whatever the gift, it had to be the best of its kind, and was given with spontaneity and whole-heartedness. In recent years, hearing of the intention of Grace Church, Brampton, to remodel some of the rooms of the church, Mrs. Eaton instantly and generously offered to furnish one of the parlors in memory of her

mother who had been a member of that church forty years before.

The pleasure of European travel--for she took many trips abroad--enriched her mind and enlarged her vision. The Passion Play at Oberammergan was one of her most vivid recollections and she graphically described its awesome and dramatic effect upon her mind and the shocked impression of sacrilege with which Mr. Eaton regarded the Crucifixion Scene.

With leisure came a variety of activities. She took up fencing and probably owed to that, to riding and other forms of regular exercise, the agility and strength of her magnificent physique which she retained even beyond fourscore.

Her dramatic instinct and natural love of literature led to the forming of a Dramatic Club which met at her home once a week for the reading of standard authors, and many of her friends remember with delight, Mrs. Eaton's impersonations of well-known characters from Dickens and Shakespeare. On one occasion a lady, after hearing her recite Queen Catherine's Appeal, from Henry VIII, said to Mr. Eaton, "Mrs. Eaton gave the lines with great dignity and pathos, didn't she?"

"I don't know much about that," said Mr. Eaton modestly, "but I do know that Mother looks like a queen."

His genuine admiration of his wife was constantly and frankly expressed; perhaps that was one reason why their sons, in turn accorded to their mother such an unusual measure of deference, affection and homage.

The Dramatic Club eventually developed, through Timothy

Eaton's generosity, into the Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression, which was built in 1905, and in whose earlier sessions Mrs. Eaton took an active part.

In these later years, she laughingly confessed to having cherished in girlhood, secret but unexpressed longings "to be an actress"--a vocation not to be talked of openly in those days. Her dramatic activities were not confined to academic and formal occasions; her gift of humor and mimicry made her at all times an agreeable and fascinating companion, when with imitative facial expression and characteristic speech and gesture, she conjured up the image of odd characters with whom she came in contact. She detested affectation and insincerity and in her impersonations frequently held them up to ridicule.

After her husband's accident and consequent physical inactivity, she read aloud to him, tirelessly by the hour, all kinds of novels and re-read many of his favorite stories of strong, simple, purposeful people.

On one occasion when invited to a "Grandmother's Tea", this enterprising lady, then 65, entered spontaneously into the spirit of the affair by dressing in a beautiful old gown of the Martha Washington period and contributing to the old-fashioned programme the song

"Always the same Darby my own,

Always true to your old wife Joan."

Perhaps Mrs. Eaton's strongest instinct--one might almost call it a passion--was hospitality, which was extended,

not only to friends, but to the stranger within her gates, from the workmen who were remembered with afternoon tea, to distinguished visitors sojourning in Canada; and to all, her manner was equally gracious, sincere and natural. Her son, Sir John, delighted to bring guests, eminent in the business, political or professional world, to meet his mother whom he introduced with pardonable pride.

One day at her Oakville home a friend was reading aloud from Van Dyke's poems some verses written for a new house and the motto for the doorway expressive of sincerity, simplicity and hospitality, instantly appealed to Mrs. Eaton.

"I want that verse above my door", she said suddenly, and as no time was ever lost between her expression of an intention and the fulfilment of it, in less than a fortnight the carved lines appeared above the entrance at Raymar:

"The lintel low enough to keep out pomp and pride,
The threshold high enough to turn deceit aside,
The door-bands strong enough from robbers to defend,
This door will open at a touch to every friend."

She loved to fill her Muskoka home with happy house parties and to share with intimate friends the beauty, healthfulness and luxury of her summer home. At dinner she would lean towards the nearest guest and quote in homely phrase and with a twinkle, "Eat hearty and give the house a good name." At intervals, she gave parties for the entertainment of the Muskoka settlers, and was beloved by all who enjoyed the genuineness and

heartiness of the welcome accorded them. The local Women's Institute, Golf Clubs and Regatta Association received her loyal and generous support given without any air of patronage or of importance.

When war was declared in August 1914, Mrs. Eaton was one of the first to recognize the necessity of immediate action and in less than a fortnight she arranged a mammoth Garden Fete at Ravenscrag, for the benefit of the Red Cross. All through the war, her interest in the "boys" was as keenly practical as it was sympathetic and the generous treatment accorded the enlisted employees of the T. Eaton Co. was heartily sanctioned by "Mother".

In the summer of 1916 some members of the Muskoka Battalion went up to Ravenscrag at the suggestion of their colonel, to give an exhibition of machine gun drill. The placing and firing of the guns, the commands, the supposed casualties visualized to Mrs. Eaton's quick imagination the scenes being enacted at the Front.

"Ah! We can't do enough for these boys", she said and instantly invited officers and men to an impromptu dinner such as only the storehouse of Ravenscrag could furnish to so many unexpected guests.

Mrs. Eaton retained to the last, her initiative and her progressive and adventurous spirit. In the summer of 1919, when the noted Canadian Ace, Col. Wm. Bishop, a grandson-in-law of Mrs. Eaton's was conducting aeroplane excursions in Muskoka, Sir John Eaton descended unexpectedly one day at Ravenscrag and said,

"Mother, will you fly with me?" "Of course I will", promptly responded the intrepid lady. "I have wanted to fly all my life."

On alighting, she described the experience as marvelous. "From the heights I discovered unknown lakes hidden in the woods, and realized for the first time what a bird's eye view meant."

"Mother", said Sir John, "I never was so proud of you as I am at this moment. Seventy-eight and a good sport."

Never was mother more honored by a son on all occasions. The first bloom of the rarest plant found its way to Mother. Attentions were showered upon her not intermittently, but daily.

Mrs. Eaton's public appearances were largely confined to occasions connected with the Institutions she had founded, the laying of the corner stone of the Margaret Eaton School and the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church, the presenting of the Colors to the Eaton Machine Gun Battery, the depositing of the Colors in the church on their return, the opening of the T. Eaton Store with a golden key at the Golden Jubilee Celebration in 1919, the unveiling of the Memorial Tablet in 1922, in honor of the fallen heroes; and on all these occasions, Mrs. Eaton's aristocratic bearing, gracious and composed manner, and hair like spun silver, dressed a la Marquise, made her a distinguished figure.

Sorrow came to her in 1900 in the death of her eldest son, Edward Young Eaton at the age of thirty-seven, and again in 1907, when her husband, Timothy Eaton, to whose happiness, comfort and success, she had devoted herself for forty-five years, was

taken from her. After his father's death, Sir John Eaton continued to consult his mother on all important issues; the improving of labor and living conditions, the formation of literary, musical and social clubs for the employees, the magnificent gift of a surgical wing to the General Hospital in memory of Mr. Eaton, and an endowment for Research Work at the University; and to all these noble enterprises "Mother" gave her unqualified approval and whole-hearted support.

The death of her son, Sir John, in 1922 cast a shadow over her remaining years and she never wholly recovered her buoyancy of spirit. Three months before his death Sir John had arranged that his mother should be appointed Honorary President of the T. Eaton Co.

During Mr. T. Eaton's lifetime, he had confided to his wife his growing ideals of Humanity and Religion, and mindful of her late husband's vision of an institutional church, which would be open every day in the week, whose activities would be a safeguard to the young and an opportunity for service, Mrs. Eaton with her son's approval, built in 1914, the Timothy Eaton Church in memory of her husband.

The beauty of its architecture, the dignity of its appointments, the completeness of its equipment, are no less a testimony to the devotion and standards of a remarkable woman who builded "better than she knew", not only a beautiful memorial to her husband, but an enduring monument to her own great qualities of mind and heart.

Mrs. Eaton is survived by two daughters, Mrs. Josephine Burnside of London, England, who in recent years has spent the greater part of each year with her mother, and Mrs. C. E. Burden of Toronto; one son, Wm. F. Eaton of Oakville, fifteen grandchildren, and five great grandchildren, also a sister Mrs. C. H. Bishop and a brother Mr. Geo. Beatty. Mr. R. Y. Eaton, a nephew succeeded Sir John as President of the T. Eaton Co.



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